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THE QUR'AN AS LITERATURE

Mustansir Mir

I

In the 1890s Richard Moulton, author of *The Literary Study of the Bible*, was able to justify the need for his work by pointing out that "Literature," as opposed to "literatures"—Greek, Hebrew, and German—"is a separate entity" which, with its "foundation forms . . . such as Epic, Lyric, Dramatic," deserves to be studied in its own right, and that such a study would break new ground (iv-v). And in 1987 Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, editors of *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, spoke with satisfaction of the proven effectiveness of the literary approach to the Bible (2), adding that there is "a need, felt by clerical and secular students alike, to achieve a new accommodation with the Bible as it is, which is to say, as literature of high importance and power" (4). The Qur'an, like the Bible, is an acknowledged literary masterpiece. But, unfortunately, it has not yet received the kind of attention Moulton speaks of with reference to the Bible. And it will probably not be in the near future that one will be able to speak, as Alter and Kermode have in regard to the Bible, about significant gains on the literary front regarding the Qur'an. But, one might ask, does there not exist, at least in Arabic, a large number of works dealing with the literary qualities of the Qur'an? Such works certainly exist. But most of them are, in respect of their orientation, premises, and structure, works of theology rather than of literary criticism, a typical example being *The Inimitability of the Qur'an* by the medieval scholar Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (950-1013). This being the case, studying the Qur'an as literature—and purely as literature—is not unlike setting foot on new territory.

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A meaningful literary study of a discourse assumes that the discourse possesses a certain degree of unity and coherence. The Qur'an is divided into 114 chapters (Arabic: *surahs*), the obvious major units of the scripture. The chapters are of varying lengths, from three verses to 286. That these units possess any unity or coherence is a notion foreign to most of the traditional Muslim scholars, to whom each *surah* is composed of so many isolated verses or passages.[1] This atomistic view of the Qur'an, for which there are historical reasons,[2] has been a great impediment to a study of the Qur'an as literature. In traditional works, the Qur'an is made out to be somewhat like the epitaph on the tomb of Midas the Phrygian: "[I]t makes no difference," as Socrates explains to Phaedrus, "what order the lines come in" (264c). This is not to disparage those works, for they have much to offer, and they must always serve as a starting point for the literary study of the Qur'an. It is nevertheless true that the assumption of disjointedness has veiled much of the Qur'an's literary excellence from view. An important way in which twentieth-century Qur'an exegesis differs from classical exegesis is that many Muslim scholars today regard the Qur'an as possessing significant coherence. This development, which cannot be discussed here,[3] makes a systematic literary study of the Qur'an both possible and imperative. Such a study, if carried out with a properly developed methodology, will for all practical purposes be new in character.

A systematic literary study of the Qur'an should be conducted in accordance with the principles of literary criticism and independently of theological considerations. The issue of the relationship between the theological and the literary aspects of a scripture is a difficult one. The two aspects are linked, but not integrally, which makes it possible, or even desirable, to study them independently of each other. That they are linked is obvious from the fact that the Qur'an makes use of literary techniques and devices to present its message: it tells stories, cites parables, uses figures of speech, and draws character sketches, for example. That they are not linked integrally needs a little explanation.

The Qur'an claims to be inimitable and challenges its opponents to produce a work like it (e.g. 2:23; 11:13; 17:88; 52:33-34). The inimitability later came to be construed essentially in literary terms, and the theologians made belief in the matchlessness of the Qur'an part of a Muslim's faith. In its historical exposition, the doctrine of inimitability made the literary study of the Qur'an a handmaiden to the theological aspect of the scripture. But the doctrine overlooks a crucial fact. The Qur'anic challenge was addressed not to the believers but to the unbelievers, and was not simply a denunciation of the unbelievers,

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but constituted an invitation to them to carefully examine the Qur'an and see if it could have been, as they claimed it was, the product of the mind of a man possessed. Irrespective of what conclusion one reaches on the question of the Qur'an's origins, one must agree that the underlying assumption of the challenge was that the merit and beauty of the Qur'an could be appreciated even by those outside the fold of the faith. And if that is the case, then it would be possible to dissociate the literary study of the Qur'an from the theological study of it.[4]

For certain purposes it may even be necessary to effect such a dissociation. Perhaps a basic difference between a literary and a theological-legal approach to scripture is that the former looks for continuities, the latter for discontinuities, in the text. Under the assumption of continuity, one looks for links and connections between verses and passages, and only upon failing to find any does one concede that the text is discontinuous. But a typical Muslim theologian or lawyer searches for theological or legal content in the Qur'an, and, as soon as he finds such content, focuses on it, often in disregard of the context. But in so doing he runs the risk of making serious errors of interpretation. Consider 56:77-80:

> This is a noble Qur'an, [which originates] in a hidden [*or* well-protected] book, [and which] no one but the pure touch, [and which is] a revelation from the Lord of the universe.

Taken in context, these verses draw a distinction between the revelation of a prophet and the inspiration of a soothsayer. The Arabs believed that the soothsayers had control over genies (Arabic: *jinn*) who brought them reports from the heavens, and one of the charges against Muhammad was that he was a soothsayer pretending to be a prophet. The Qur'an is here saying that Muhammad's revelation, unlike the soothsayers' inspiration, is authentic. It makes two points, not at all unfamiliar to a student of the Qur'an: (1) that the Qur'an originates in a well-guarded book (in 43:4 and elsewhere called "The Mother Book") that is with God—the implication being that the Qur'an has an unimpeachable source; (2) that it is angels, "the pure ones," who bring down the Qur'an—the implication being that the medium through which the revelation is conveyed to Muhammad is an additional guarantee of the unadulterated nature of the revelation. The soothsayers' inspiration, on the other hand, is neither pure of origin nor secure against tampering by the wicked genies. The conclusion is obvious: Muhammad's revelation is from God. This is the internal

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logic of the verses. But legal scholars offer a different interpretation. They single out the verse (80), "None but the pure touch it," disregard the immediate and wider contexts, and interpret "the pure" to mean "those who are *ritually* pure," thus making the verse mean that only a person in a state of ritual purity may touch the Qur'an. If asked what relationship verse 80 would bear to those preceding and following it, they would have no answer, but that is the least of their worries: the verse speaks of "purity," and that is sufficient warrant to write scores of pages in books of law expounding the need to be ritually pure before touching the Qur'an. This may be an extreme example of the "manhandling" of scripture by legalistically-minded scholars, but the point is clear: looking for continuity rather than discontinuity in the text could prevent some unwarranted interpretations. Moulton is right when he says, "Historic and literary study are equal in importance: but for priority in order of time the literary treatment has the first claim" (viii-ix). For, as he adds, the text of scripture "cannot be truly interpreted until it has been read in the light of its exact literary structure" (ix).[5]

What should one expect to find in the Qur'an by way of "literature?" A brief comparison with the Bible seems inevitable. Because the Qur'an is composed of Muhammad's revelations only and the period of the compilation of the Qur'an is rather short, the Qur'an does not possess the literary variety of the Bible. There are, for example, no folk songs in the Qur'an, no elegies and lamentations, no prophetic rhapsodies, no idyllic poems, and certainly no acrostic. On the other hand, the Qur'an possesses a rich literary repertoire of its own. Besides making a masterful use of language on the level of words and phrases, it contains figures of speech, satire, and irony; employs a variety of narrative and dramatic techniques; and presents characters that, is spite of the sparse personal detail provided about them, come across as vivid figures. For those who can read the Qur'an in Arabic, the all-pervading rhythm which, in conjunction with the sustained use of what may be called rhymed prose, creates in many *surahs* a spellbinding effect that is impossible to reproduce. There is the characteristic terseness of the Qur'anic language which makes for some complex constructions, but which it is difficult to convey in English without being awkward. The existing translations of the Qur'an impose a further limitation, for they fall so far short of the highly nuanced original that a detailed study of the Qur'anic language and style on their basis is well-nigh impossible.[6]

The Qur'an dealt with a variety of subjects over a period of more

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than two decades. It is natural that it should come to have considerable stylistic variety. Still, in a certain sense, the Qur'an is marked by a unity of content and style that admits of taking a synchronic approach, especially in a study like the present. First, historically as well as theologically, the Qur'anic revelation was mediated through a single individual, Muhammad. Second, it is generally agreed that the compilation of the Qur'anic text was finished, or nearly finished, in a short period of time—within Muhammad's lifetime, according to some authorities. On these two counts the Qur'an comes to possess a unity that would justify taking the Qur'an in its finished form as the starting point of a literary investigation. To the argument that the Meccan–Medinan division of the Qur'anic *surahs* calls for a diachronic approach since the Meccan *surahs* (revealed from 610 to 622) are more poetical and rhetorical and the Medinan (622-632) more discursive and matter-of-fact, one could reply by saying that many literary devices (such as ellipsis) are as characteristic of the Medinan *surahs* as they are of the Meccan. It is true, however, that, in general, the Meccan *surahs*, with their greater narrative and dramatic element, are best suited for such a study.

II

Word Choice

The Qur'an uses words with precision and subtlety, and often the text yields its full meaning only after a careful re-reading of it. For example, an impatient Jonah shakes the dust of Nineveh off his feet and, boarding a ship, departs. S. 37:140 reads: "When he fled to a laden ship." The Arabic word used for "fled" is *abaqa*, which is specifically used for a runaway slave. Jonah of course is no slave. But then he is one—a slave of God. This one word imparts a whole new meaning to the incident. Being in the service of God, Jonah ought not to have decided on his own to quit prophesying; he should have waited for God's command. His "running away" is thus not simply a physical act that may be reported as a historical event; it is an act fraught with moral implications.

In 622 Muhammad and his followers emigrated from Mecca to Medina. Medina (literally, "city"—short for "city of the Prophet") was formerly known as Yathrib. In the Qur'an the city is invariably called "Medina"—except once, in 33:13, where it is called "Yathrib." The verse reports how, at a time of crisis, a certain group of people deserted the ranks of Muslims, appealing to their compatriots ("O people of

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Yathrib!") to give up Islam for lost. The use of "Yathrib" instead of "Medina" graphically portrays the mentality of the deserters: they were convinced that Islam was about to be wiped out and that the city would no longer be the "city of the Prophet" but would revert to its pagan status, becoming once again "Yathrib" (Islahi V:200).

In another example, "To strengthen someone's back *or* arm" is an Arabic idiom that means "to support someone." In 20:31 Moses prays to God that He appoint Aaron as his assistant. The Arabic literally translates: "Strengthen my back by means of him." In 28:35, which is a reply to the prayer, God says: "We shall strengthen your arm by means of him." The difference between "back" and "arm" in the two expressions appears to be a slight one, but perhaps it is not. "To strengthen one's back" is like providing "backing," while "to strengthen one's arm" is like providing "muscle." As such, the former suggests furnishing A with support through B in a situation where the brunt of the task will be borne by A but B, who is standing close by—"in back of him"—may be called upon to help when necessary. "To strengthen one's arm," on the other hand, would suggest providing A with support through B in a situation where B will be an active partner to A throughout, or will be A's "right arm." If this analysis is correct, then the Qur'anic use of each of the two idioms would be contextually significant: Moses, conscious that the chief responsibility for carrying out the mission is his own, humbly prays: Strengthen my *back* by means of Aaron. His prayer is more than answered with: We shall strengthen your *arm* by means of him.

The Pictorial Element

The Qur'anic language is frequently picturesque, and among the several devices that account for it are the simile and the similitude. The similes bear reference to the natural phenomena and existential situation the Arab was most familiar with, but one does not have to be an Arab to feel their force. God punished a certain rebellious people by unleashing upon it a windblast that "uprooted people as if they were stumps of hollow palm-trees" (54:20). On the Last Day people will come out of their graves and will spread out in all directions, "as if they were locusts scattered all over" (54:7). Disbelievers shy away from the divine message "as if they are frightened asses that run away from a lion" (74:50-51). The crescent moon passes through many phases and, after becoming a full moon, again "becomes like an old twig" (36:39). The Arabs thought that the mountains were not subject to change, and called them "the eternal ones." When Muhammad

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warned them of the Last Day, telling them that the world would be annihilated on that day, they sarcastically asked him, What about the mountains? Will they be destroyed too? The Qur'an replied by saying that the seemingly immovable mountains will on that day float around "like carded wool" (101:5).

S. 24:35-40 contain a series of similitudes, contrasting the people of faith with the people of disbelief. The contrast is drawn in terms of light and darkness. Verse 35 makes the point that the light of divine guidance is given to one who has kept the natural goodness of his heart intact. Already possessing an inner light, such a person is prepared to receive "the light of God." His natural goodness reinforced by faith, he comes to possess "light upon light." The verse reads:

> God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of his light is as if there is a niche, in which there is a lamp, the lamp in a glass; the glass looks as if it is a bright star. It [the lamp] is kindled from a blessed olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west, one whose oil all but lights up, even though no fire has touched it. Light upon light! God guides to His light whomever He likes. God strikes similitudes for people, and God has knowledge of all things.

The niche is the heart of the good man, and in that niche is a lamp that burns with the light of his innate goodness. The high degree of the purity and brightness of the light is emphasized. First, the lamp is enclosed in a glass, so that it has a steady and bright flame and is not put out by the wind. Second, the glass is not dirty but clear and shiny. It is like "a bright star" so that it reflects the light well. Third, the lamp is fed with olive oil that has been extracted from a tree that was planted not on the fringe of the garden—"neither of the east nor of the west"—but right in the middle of it, so that, being secure against the fury of the elements, it has yielded the purest kind of oil. The oil, in fact, is so pure that it would catch fire before coming into contact with fire. And when the oil, or the inner goodness of a man, does come into contact with fire or divine guidance, the result is "light upon light." Possessing this "double light," one sees the heavens and the earth lit up, acquiring the master key to all knowledge and understanding, for, as the opening part of the verse says, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth."

While verse 35 describes the state of the people of faith, verse 40 speaks of the condition of the people of disbelief. Here there is no light, only utter darkness:

> or [their situation is] like layers of darkness out on a deep sea [the surface of] which is covered by a wave, on top of which there is another wave, on top of

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> which there are clouds; layers of darkness piled one upon the other; when he [the disbeliever] puts out his hand he can hardly see it. And one who is not furnished with light by God has no light.

As in verse 35, so in verse 40 the details progressively heighten the effect. A sharper contrast between light and darkness could hardly be imagined.

Many other devices besides the simile and the similitude are used in the Qur'an. There is, for example, anastrophe, in which the sequence of events is purposefully changed or inverted; zeugma, in which one verb does duty for two; anaphora, in which a series of verses begins with the same words, creating a crescendo effect and leading to a climactic point; epenthesis, in which the medial vowel of a word is lengthened; and parallelism, with its several types. Another is significant use of pairs of adjectives or participles[7] in which relationships of several types are established between the adjectives or participles.

S. 68:10 speaks of a person who is *hallaf mahin*. *Hallaf* is "an inveterate swearer of oaths" and *mahin* is "base or despicable." The use of the two words next to each other implies that one who swears oaths right and left does so because he lacks self-respect and fears that his word will lack credence unless he supports it with oaths. In other words, a cause-and-effect relationship is established between the two words: a person is *hallaf* because he is *mahin*.

Many verses speak of God as being *'aziz* (powerful) and *hakim* (wise). A "powerful" being often abuses his power. The word "wise" in this construction provides assurance that God does not use His power indiscriminately. Conversely speaking, a wise being may be ineffectual if he lacks the power to enforce a wise plan. But God does not labor under this limitation, for, besides being wise, He is also powerful. It can be seen that a relationship of complementarity exists between *'aziz* and *hakim*. Variations on this relationship, yielding further subtleties of meaning, are also found. S. 8:10, referring to one of the battles Muhammad fought, says that victory comes from God alone, the verse ending with the statement that God is powerful and wise. The meaning is that God grants victory, but, if in the course of battle the believers suffer a setback, their faith in God's power should not be shaken; rather they should understand that some good will come out of that setback too, for God is not only powerful but also wise. S. 29:42 threatens the idolators, saying that He is powerful and wise. The verse means that God, if He so desired, could punish the idolators on the spot, for He is powerful; but that, if He is giving them respite, then

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it is in accordance with the principle which, being wise, He has established, namely, that men will be given an opportunity to mend their ways and thus avert punishment.

Humor, Satire, and Irony

Is not humor out of place in a scripture? To be sure, there are not many instances of humor in the Qur'an. Still, a touch of it is found here and there. During a voyage, Moses, tired, asks his young companion to bring out the food they have brought with them. The food consists of fish, but, strangely enough, the fish some time ago jumped into the water and vanished. The youth is hesitant to tell Moses about it, for Moses is not likely to believe the story. Little does he know that the disappearance of the fish was a sign appointed by God: exactly at the spot where the fish disappeared, Moses was to meet a certain guide. But explain he must, and so he utters a long-drawn-out sentence (18:63) in which he spends more time apologizing than explaining how the fish disappeared. The comical effect is increased when we notice that Moses completely disregards the apology and hastens back to the designated spot.

Some of the satire in the Qur'an is blunt. The affluent wicked, when they receive punishment in the hereafter, will be told: "Taste it [boiling water]! It is you who were the noble dignitary [in the world]!" (44:49). On other occasions the satire is moderate in tone, but no less pungent for that. Abraham, finding his opportunity, is about to smash the idols in the temple. But, upon noticing the offering of food laid out before them, he decides to take his time. "Won't you eat?" he asks them in mock seriousness (37:91). Receiving no response, he pretends to be angry: "What is the matter with you that you are not speaking?" (verse 92). Humor and satire blend when, after destroying all but one of the idols in the temple, Abraham, questioned by the temple custodians, denies that he destroyed the idols, saying: "O no, it is their chief god over here [the one Abraham had spared] who did that; ask them [idols] *if they can speak*" (21:63). The point is driven home and the idolators are put to shame.

The Qur'an is quite rich in irony.[8] In tempting Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, Satan suggests to them that the fruit of the forbidden tree could transform them into angels, but that God would not like them to become angels, hence the prohibition to eat of the tree (7:20). Ironically, the angels have already bowed before man and acknowledged his supremacy, so that man's attempt to become an angel would constitute a descent, and not an ascent, for man.

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In an incident from Abraham's life, he uses irony to confute his idolatrous people. According to the Qur'an, Abraham's people worshipped the heavenly bodies. Worship of the heavenly bodies is predicated, among other things, on the view that their extraordinary brilliance entitles them to godhead. In 6:74-79 Abraham shows the untenability of this view by arguing that the heavenly bodies not only rise and dazzle but also set, thereby "losing" their brilliance. But he chooses a novel method to make his point. The passage reads:

> When night enveloped him, he saw a star. He said, "This is my Lord." But when it set, he said, "I do not like the ones that set." When he saw the moon shining, he said, "This is my Lord." But when it set, he said, "If my Lord does not guide me, I shall become one of the misguided." When he saw the sun shining, he said, "This is my Lord, this is the biggest [of them all]." But when it set, he said, "My people, I have nothing to do with your idolatry."

One can see how Abraham sets his people up, so to speak, using irony to systematically cut the ground from under the belief-system of his people.

Wordplay and Ambiguity

Wordplay is involved in the use of the word *misr* in 2:61. As an indefinite noun, *misr* means "city"; as a diptote, "Egypt." The Israelites, just out of Egypt, are already tired of the austere existence of the desert and recall their life in Egypt. The verse says: "Go into *some city* and you shall have what you have asked for." In the verse, *misr* is indefinite, but the pun is obvious: If you want to enjoy a life of ease and comfort, then go back to your life *in Egypt* (Islahi, I:61). Also, "what you have asked for" is quite ambiguous. What have the Israelites *really* asked for? The good food they used to eat in Egypt, or the life of slavery? They would not, of course, opt for slavery, but then they must remember that a life of hardship in a state of freedom is preferable to a comfortable existence in a state of servitude.

In another instance of ambiguity, the Meccan opponents of Muhammad accused him of fabricating the Qur'an and passing it off as divine speech. S. 11:13 challenges them to produce ten chapters like it, and then adds the word *muftarayat*, which means "fabricated." In the context, the word gives two different but equally applicable meanings: (a) if you succeed in producing a discourse like the Qur'an, you will have proved that Muhammad has fabricated the Qur'an, so go ahead and make your attempt; (b) it is the discourse produced by *you* that will be a fabrication, so go ahead and fabricate.

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Narrative

To begin with, there is the graphic description. The theme of the Last Day occasions many passages that would fall in this category. Cataclysmic changes will take place on that fateful day (82:1-4):

> When the heavens explode,
> When the stars are scattered,
> When the oceans are poured out,
> When the graves are ransacked:
> On that day one will find out the [value of] actions one has performed or failed to perform.

Again: "The entire earth will be [no more than] His handful on the Day of Resurrection, and the heavens, all rolled up, will be in His right hand" (39:67). And there is the haunting picture of the *zaqqum* (37:62), the "accursed tree" (17:60) that will grow in hell: "It is a tree that sprouts in the very core of hell. Its spathes make it out to be like so many heads of devils" (37:64-65).

A reader of the Qur'an will notice that the Qur'an does not usually tell a complete story in one place but relates different parts of it in different *surahs*. This may cause bewilderment. But if the idea of the *surah* as a unity is accepted, the Qur'anic narrative might appear in a new light. The Qur'an never tells a story for its own sake, but rather uses it to drive home the point it happens to be making in a *surah* or in a section of it. As a rule, considerations of thematic unity determine which portion of a story will be narrated in which *surah*. In other words, the story told in a given *surah* is likely to be *surah*-specific, the apparent disjointedness of the Qur'an in this case concealing a carefully worked-out technique of storytelling.

Among the *surahs* that narrate the story of Abraham are 6, 21, 51, and 60.[9] In each of these *surahs* a different portion of the Abraham story is told. S. 6 is mainly addressed to the idolators of Mecca, and criticism of idolatry figures prominently in it. The opening verse of the *surah*, for example, reads: "Grateful praise is due to God, Who created the heavens and the earth and made darkness and light; and yet the disbelievers set up partners to God." Now the Meccan idolators regarded Abraham as their ancestor. S. 6, therefore, selects from Abraham's life (verse 74-83) that incident in which he is shown as refuting his idolatrous people. The connection between the incident and the *surah*'s theme is obvious, the *surah* and the incident both making the point that the Meccans, if they wish to follow Abraham, must abandon their idolatry and worship the one true God.

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The thesis of S. 21 is that defeat of the Meccans at the hands of Muslims is imminent. Verse 18, for example, says: "Rather, We launch the truth at falsehood and it [truth] crushes it [falsehood], the latter taking flight." Verse 44 is more explicit, as it refers to the steady advance of the Muslim faith, from its base in Medina, toward Mecca: "Do they not see that We are approaching the land [of Mecca], shrinking its borders? Is it they [idolators] who are going to be victorious?" The portion selected from Abraham's story (verses 51-70) for this chapter relates how Abraham breaks the idols worshipped by his people. The image-breaking signifies the defeat of idolatry, and it should be remembered that, upon conquering Mecca, Muhammad ordered that all the images in the sanctuary of the Ka'bah be destroyed. In other words, Abraham's action in the *surah* prefigures Muhammad's action in later history.

The theme of S. 51 is reward for the virtuous and punishment for the evil in the hereafter. Verse 6 announces the theme: "Recompense is certainly going to take place." The incident related from Abraham's (and Lot's) life (verses 24-34) illustrates the theme: Abraham will be rewarded with a son in old age, and the people of Lot will be destroyed for their evil; the reward-and-punishment system in this world thus serves as a pointer to the reward-and-punishment system that will operate in the hereafter.

S. 60 stresses the need for the Muslims to make a break with the Meccans, in whose midst they had lived for so long. This theme is stated in the opening verse, which enjoins Muslims not to take "My enemies and your enemies for friends," and in the concluding verse, which rephrases that thought. Abraham is mentioned in verses 4-6, which present him as a model for Muslims: he broke with his people when the latter turned hostile to him. The lesson is clear: the Muslims must likewise dissociate themselves from the Meccans. As in Ss. 6, 21, and 51, the incident related in S. 60 is found to be *surah*-specific.

Although the Qur'an usually describes only a portion of a story at a time, the portion given in any place is usually self-contained. The story of Adam told in 2:30-39, for example, is complete in itself, as is the story of Abraham and Lot in 11:69-83. Just as only that part of a story will be told in a *surah* that contributes to the *surah*'s overall theme, so if several stories contribute to that end, they will be combined in a single *surah*. Ss. 18, 21, and 25 contain some obvious examples.

Despite what has been said about the narrative technique of the Qur'an, one should not think that there is no sustained storytelling in the Qur'an. S. 12, "Joseph," is the longest uninterrupted story in the

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Qur'an. In a published study of it,[10] I have tried to show that it has a unified plot, and that the plot is organized on the analogy of the rhetorical device of "involution and evolution": the first half of the story creates a series of tensions which are resolved in reverse order in the second half.

Dramatic Dialogue

One of the features of the Qur'anic style that has received practically no attention is the dramatic dialogue. A close study of the Qur'anic dialogue reveals that its usually simple text contains profound insights into the workings of the human mind and the motives behind human conduct. Abraham's dialogues are eminently suited for such a study. Here we shall confine ourselves to a few remarks about the dialogue of Moses and Pharaoh in 26:16 ff. This is a fast-paced dialogue in which the character of Moses is contrasted with that of Pharaoh. The cunning Pharaoh, initially on the offensive, soon finds himself beating a retreat before the relentless attack of a self-confident Moses, his (Pharaoh's) mood changing from mock gentleness and condescension to that of satire and ridicule to that of utter frustration and indignation. An interesting feature of the dialogue is that while Pharaoh continually changes his stance, Moses sticks with the position he states in the beginning and only reinforces it with his subsequent remarks.

The dialogue opens with Moses' declaration that he is a prophet sent by the "Lord of the universe," and with his demand that Pharaoh allow the Israelites to go with him. Pharaoh condescendingly reminds Moses of the upbringing he received in Pharaoh's palace, and, by reminding Moses that he is guilty of killing a Copt, also makes an unambiguous threat (verse 19). Moses replies that his killing of the Copt was an accident. As for his upbringing in Pharaoh's house, he acknowledges it as a favor by Pharaoh, but curtly tells him that he cannot on that count enslave the Israelites (verses 20-21). Cornered by this trenchant reply, Pharaoh makes another move, asking Moses in an obviously satirical tone: "Who is this 'Lord of the universe' you speak of?" (verse 24). Moses' reply is brief but to the point: "The Lord of the heavens and the earth." Pharaoh, who claims to be the supreme lord, feels the blow of the answer. At the same time, he senses that some of his courtiers may have been unduly impressed with the boldness of Moses, and so, in an attempt to laugh Moses off, he turns to his courtiers, saying: "You hear that, don't you?" (verse 25). Undaunted, Moses presses the attack: "Your Lord, and also the Lord of your ancestors of former times." A powerful dent is made in the ancestral

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religion of Egypt, and Pharaoh, until now feigning self-control, shows visible signs of impatience. He suggests to his courtiers that Moses is insane (verse 27), hoping to put an abrupt end to the discussion. Moses refuses to let up: "Lord of the East and the West," he adds. This is the last straw. Pharaoh threatens to imprison Moses (verse 30). "Even if I should present a clear sign [miracle]?" asks Moses. Pharaoh has to consent, for his courtiers must have been intrigued by the offer of Moses, and it would be imprudent of Pharaoh to disregard the mood of the court. It might also have occurred to him that if Moses showed a miracle, then he (Pharaoh) might be able to explain it away as a cheap trick. At any rate, he consents, probably grudgingly. When Moses performs his miracles, Pharaoh is perplexed, but soon pulls himself together, observing that Moses is at best an accomplished sorcerer. But something must be done about this sorcerer if he is not to steal the show. The courtiers advise that the official magicians be summoned to compete with Moses. It is not necessary to recount the rest of the story, for the above analysis should make it sufficiently clear that the Qur'anic dialogue can be a rewarding field of study.

Characterization

Seen from a theological standpoint, the Qur'anic characters would appear to be embodiments of abstract traits rather than real flesh-and-blood figures which I believe they are. Obvious candidates for a study of Qur'anic characterization would be the prophets, particularly figures like Abraham and Moses. Here I will confine my remarks to the Qur'anic technique of presenting memorable characters in a few lines—the vignettes. One such vignette is to be found in 74:18-25.[11] The context presents before us a typical rich leader of Mecca who is worried by the spread of Muhammad's message in the city. He is in danger of losing his following, unless he can convince his followers that the Qur'an is Muhammad's own speech falsely attributed to God. How does he accomplish his purpose? Finding himself in the company of his followers, who look up to him for a response to Muhammad's message, he plays a game. His mind is of course made up, but he does not want to give the impression that he is rejecting that message without giving it serious thought. So he reflects on the message, and appears to be making a careful assessment of it (verse 18). In a parenthetic remark (verses 19-20) the Qur'an suggests that he is only going through the motions. But his followers, unable to see through his game, are impressed by the careful thought he is devoting to the whole matter. Then, serious thinker that he is, he looks up, as if weighing an idea that has just flashed into his mind. But no, he must give it

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more thought, and so he knits his brows, not forgetting to contort some of his facial features (verse 22). He is about to deliver his verdict and his followers await the moment anxiously. What does he do? Issue a statement rashly? That would not be prudent. He slowly turns around, takes a step backward, and gives his judgment: the Qur'an is not divine in origin; it is at best an eloquent discourse that, like magic, has a spellbinding effect on its audience. This is a complete portrait, and it is presented in only a few short verses.

III

This brief survey has left out many literary features of the Qur'an, some of which are symmetrical structures; ellipsis; implicit transitional links; parenthetic extension; use of motif words; use of passives to convey certain shades of meaning; periphrasis; and oaths. But I hope it has succeeded in suggesting that the Qur'an is a vast quarry that awaits the attention of literary scholars.

This study is by no means the very first to be written on the subject of the Qur'an as literature. A few, if not many, works dealing with some literary aspect of the Qur'an exist in European languages. There is, however, a great need for developing a theory that is, on the one hand, based on a recognition of the subject as an independent field, and that will, on the other hand, take an integrated view of the various literary aspects of the Qur'an. Western scholars with their highly developed discipline of literary criticism can make a significant contribution in this regard. Should they undertake to do so, the "Qur'an as literature" might well become an important meeting-ground for Muslim and Orientalist scholars.

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NOTES

1. See M. A. Draz, *Initiation au Koran*, 89-90, where the author speaks of the failure of scholars in this regard, identifying some of the causes of the formation of such a view. It should be added that, in the West, as Hartwig Hirschfeld, John Merrill, and others have pointed out, a systematic study of the Qur'an has been severely hindered by the view of the Qur'an as a disjointed work.

2. The Qur'an is made up of revelations, small and large, that Muhammad received over a period of about twenty-three years. As to the question of who compiled the revelations into the Qur'an that we have, most Muslim scholars believe that Muhammad was responsible at least for the arrangement of verses within individual chapters, if not for arranging the chapters themselves as well. But then the question arises

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whether the chapters thereby acquired, or were meant to acquire, any unity or coherence. The generality of Muslim scholars denied that they did or were meant to. Two of the reasons for this view are as follows. First, the Qur'an does not have a chronological arrangement; in fact sometimes it does not seem to care about such an arrangement. Second, while some of its chapters are obviously well structured, others seem to lack all structure. Unable to detect, in the latter category, patterns similar to those found in the former, the scholars, in the interest of holding a consistent viewpoint, declared that the Qur'an *as a rule* lacks coherence. The objection of incoherence was met with the reply that the assumption of coherence is not essential to deriving guidance from the Qur'an. Conceivably, however, one could have begun at the other end and, taking the well structured chapters as the starting point, made a determined effort to find method and structure in the rest of the chapters. Such attempts have been made in the present century.

3. For arguments in support of the view that the Qur'anic chapters and, in fact, the whole of the Qur'an is marked by definite patterns of coherence, see my book, *Coherence in the Qur'an*, especially pp. 30-31 and chs. 3-4.

4. Whether this separation is made permanently (so that the Qur'an is viewed simply as a work of literature) or temporarily (so that one returns to examine the relationship between the two aspects) is not crucial to the argument of this paper.

5. Alter and Kermode echo the thought when they write: "Indeed literary analysis must come first, for unless we have a sound understanding of what the text is doing or saying, it will not be of much value in other respects" (2).

6. I have given my own translation of the Qur'anic verses cited. The following abbreviations are used: S. = *Surah*; Ss. = *Surahs*.

7. Use of more than two adjectives or participles is not infrequent, but, for the sake of simplicity, the treatment here is restricted to their use in pairs.

8. See "Irony in the Qur'an: A Study of Surah 12" (forthcoming), *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

9. The discussion of this example is adapted from Islahi.

10. See "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," *Muslim World*, 76 (1986) 1:15.

11. The following treatment is adapted from Islahi (8:51-53).

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